

CD1

CD2

- | | | | |
|--|------|---|------|
| 1. 78827-2 Drop Me Off In Harlem | 2.40 | 1. 17922-1 Waiting In The Garden | 2.41 |
| 2. 78828-2 Reaching For The Cotton Moon | 2.55 | 2. 17923-1 Dinah Lou | 2.49 |
| 3. 78829-1-2 Love Is The Thing | 2.58 | 3. 17924-1 Cotton | 3.09 |
| 4. 80278-1 The Stuff Is Here (And It's Mellow) | 2.55 | 4. 17925-1 Truckin' | 2.47 |
| 5. 80279-1 The Growl | 2.55 | 5. 18419-1 Blue Mood | 3.09 |
| 6. 16035-A Swingin' In E Flat | 2.59 | 6. 18420-1 E Flat Stride | 2.47 |
| 7. 16036-A Let's Have A Jubilee | 2.52 | 7. 18421-1 Broken Dreams Of You | 3.07 |
| 8. 16037-A Out Of A Dream | 3.02 | 8. 18422-1 Yes! Yes! | 2.57 |
| 9. 16271-1 African Lullaby | 3.04 | 9. 18547-2 Shoe Shine Boy | 2.43 |
| 10. 16272-1 Solitude | 3.03 | 10. 18548-2 Midnight Ramble | 2.58 |
| 11. 16273-1 Dancing Dogs | 2.49 | 11. 19296-1 Red Rhythm | 3.02 |
| 12. 16465-1 Love's Serenade | 2.57 | 12. 19297-1 Everything Is Still Okay | 3.13 |
| 13. 16466-1 Keep The Rhythm Going | 2.51 | 13. 19298-1 Jes' Natch'ully Lazy | 3.04 |
| 14. 16467-1 Like A Bolt From The Blue | 3.01 | 14. 19299-1 St. Louis Wiggle Rhythm | 2.54 |
| 15. 16523-1 Blue Interlude | 2.54 | 15. 19685-1 Merry - Go -Round | 2.52 |
| 16. 16524-1 A Rainbow Filled With Music | 2.43 | 16. 19686-1 It Will Have To Do Until The Real Thing Comes Along | 3.17 |
| 17. 16525-1 Devil In The Moon | 2.56 | 17. 19687-2 In A Sentimental Mood | 2.52 |
| 18. 16700-1 Back Beats | 2.47 | 18. 19688-1 Carry Me Back To Green Pastures | 3.09 |
| 19. 16701-1 Spitfire | 3.01 | 19. 20073-1 Balloonacy | 3.00 |
| 20. 16702-1 Brown Sugar Mine | 3.11 | 20. 20074-1 Barrelhouse | 3.05 |
| 21. 17759-1 Ride Red Ride | 3.01 | 21. 20075-1 The Moon Is Grinning At Me | 3.02 |
| 22. 17760-1 Harlem Heat | 3.03 | 22. 20076-1 Showboat Shuffle | 3.16 |
| 23. 17761-1 Once To Every Heart | 2.56 | 23. 20294-1 Big John's Special | 2.58 |
| 24. 17796-1 Congo Caravan | 2.41 | 24. 20295-1 Mr. Ghost Goes To Town | 3.24 |
| 25. 17797-1 There's Rhythm In Harlem | 3.11 | 25. 20296-1 Callin' Your Bluff | 3.00 |
| 26. 17798-1 Tallahassee | 2.36 | 26. 20297-1 Algiers Stomp | 3.04 |

Total Time: 76.12

Total Time: 78.33

MILLS BLUE RHYTHM BAND 1933-1936



Featuring:
**Red Allen, Crawford Wethington, Adelaide Hall,
J.C. Higginbotham**

RTR 79045
JAZZRTR 79045
JAZZ

DISCOGRAPHY

CD 1

MILLS BLUE RHYTHM BAND

Lucky Millinder, dir; Wardell Jones, Shelton Hemphill, Ed Anderson, Eddie Mallory, t; George Washington, Henry Hicks, tb; Crawford Wethington, as, bar; Gene Mikell, cl, as; Joe Garland, cl, ts, bar, a; Edgar Hayes, p; Benny James, bj, g; Hayes Alvis, bb, sb; O'Neil Spencer, d; Benny Carter, a; Adelaide Hall, v.
New York, December 4, 1933.

1. 78827-2 **DROP ME OFF IN HARLEM**
(Ellington - Kenny) - vAH
(unissued on 78rpm)
2. 78828-2 **REACHING FOR THE COTTON MOON**
(Stept - Green) - vAH
(unissued on 78rpm)
3. 78829-1-2 **LOVE IS THE THING**
(Young - Washington)
(unissued on 78rpm)

J.C. Higginbotham, tb replaces Hicks.
Chicago, February 20, 1934

4. 80278-1 **THE STUFF IS HERE**
(And It's Mellow) (Smith - Bishop - Williams)
 5. 80279-1 **THE GROWL**
(White)
- Henry Allen, t replaces Anderson;
Lawrence Lucie, g replaces James; Elmer James, sb replaces Alvis; George Washington, Alex Hill, a; Chuck Richards, v.
New York, October 4, 1934
6. 16035-A **SWINGIN' IN E FLAT**
(Washington) - aGW
 7. 16036-A **LET'S HAVE A JUBILEE**
(Hill - Mills) - aAH
 8. 16037-A **OUT OF A DREAM**
(Washington - Hayes) - vCR

New York, December 5, 1934

9. 16271-1 **AFRICAN LULLABY**
(Hayes - Mills)

10. 16272-1 **SOLITUDE**
(Ellington - De Lange - Mills) - vCR
11. 16273-1 **DANCING DOGS**
(Hudson)

New York, December 11, 1934

12. 16465-1 **LOVE'S SERENADE**
(Hayes - Kurtz - Mills) - vCR
13. 16466-1 **KEEP THE RHYTHM GOING**
(Garland)
14. 16467-1 **LIKE A BOLT FROM THE BLUE**
(Oakland - Paris - Mills) - vCR

CHUCK RICHARDS

Vocal, acc. By Henry Allen, t; Benny Morton, tb; Buster Bailey, cl; Charlie Beal, p; Lawrence Lucie, g; Billy Taylor, sb.
New York, December 19, 1934

15. 16523-1 **BLUE INTERLUDE**
(Carter - Kurtz - Mills)
16. 16524-1 **A RAINBOW FILLED WITH MUSIC**
(Hill - Kurtz - Mills)
17. 16525-1 **DEVIL IN THE MOON**
(Hill - Kurtz - Mills)

MILLS BLUE RHYTHM BAND
Lucky Millinder, dir; Wardell Jones,

Shelton Hemphill, t; Henry Allen, t, v; George Washington, tb, v; J.C. Higginbotham, tb; Gene Mikell, Crawford Wethington, cl, as; Joe Garland, cl, ts, bar, a; Edgar Hayes, p, a; Lawrence Lucie, g; Elmer James, sb; O'Neil Spencer, d; Alex Hill, Will Hudson, a; Chuck Richards, v.
New York, January 25, 1935

18. 16700-1 **BACK BEATS**
(Hill - Mills) - aAH
19. 16701-1 **SPITFIRE** (Hudson)
20. 16702-1 **BROWN SUGAR MINE**
(Garland - Mills - Kurtz) - vCR

New York, July 2, 1935

21. 17759-1 **RIDE, RED, RIDE**
(Millinder - Mills) - vLM, aWH
22. 17760-1 **HARLEM HEAT**
(Hudson) - aWH
23. 17761-1 **ONCE TO EVERY HEART**
(Kurtz - Mills - Garland) - vCR

New York, July 9, 1935

24. 17796-1 **CONGO CARAVAN**
(Garland)
25. 17797-1 **THERE'S RHYTHM IN HARLEM**
(Garland)
26. 17798-1 **TALLAHASSEE**
(Hayes - Kurtz - Mills)

CD 2

New York, August 1, 1935

1. 17922-1 **WAITING IN THE GARDEN**
(Koehler - Bloom) - vCR
2. 17923-1 **DINAH LOU**
(Koehler - Bloom) - vCR
3. 17924-1 **COTTON**
(Koehler - Bloom) - vCR
4. 17925-1 **TRUCKIN'**
(Koehler - Bloom) - vHA

Tab Smith, as, a, replaces Mikell.

New York, December 20, 1935

5. 18419-1 **BLUE MOOD**
(Mills - Hayes) (unissued on 78rpm)
6. 18420-1 **E FLAT STRIDE**
(unissued on 78rpm)
7. 18421-1 **BROKEN DREAMS OF YOU**
(Hayes - Richards - Mills) - vCR
8. 18422-1 **YES! YES!**
(Mills - Millinder) - vLM&ch

New York, January 21, 1936

9. 18547-2 **SHOE SHINE BOY**
(Cahn - Chaplin) - vCR
(unissued on 78rpm)
10. 18548-2 **MIDNIGHT RAMBLE**
(unissued on 78rpm)

New York, May 20, 1936

11. 19296-1 **RED RHYTHM** (Allen) - vLM
12. 19297-1 **EVERYTHING IS STILL OKAY**
(Higginbotham) - vCR
13. 19298-1 **JES' NATCH'ULLY LAZY** ((Stone - Tharpe - Bishop) - vCR-GW
14. 19299-1 **ST. LOUIS WIGGLE RHYTHM** (Millinder - Smith)

New York, August 11, 1936

15. 19685-1 **MERRY - GO -ROUND**
(Ellington)
16. 19686-1 **IT WILL HAVE TO DO**
Until The Real Thing Comes Along (Cahn - Chaplin - Freeman) - vCR



17. 19687-2 **IN A SENTIMENTAL MOOD**
(Ellington - Mills) - vCR
18. 19688-1 **CARRY ME BACK TO GREEN PASTURES**
(Pepper) - vCR
19. 20073-1 **BALLOONACY**
(Millinder - Smith)
20. 20074-1 **BARRELHOUSE**
(Smith) - aTS
21. 20075-1 **THE MOON IS GRINNING AT ME**
(Hudson - Jones - Mills) - vCR
22. 20076-1 **SHOWBOAT SHUFFLE**
(Ellington)
- New York, November 20, 1936
23. 20294-1 **BIG JOHN'S SPECIAL**
(Henderson)
24. 20295-1 **MR. GHOST GOES TO TOWN**
(Parish - Mills - Hudson)
25. 20296-1 **CALLIN' YOUR BLUFF**
(Kyle) - aBK
26. 20297-1 **ALGIERS STOMP**
(Allen)

SECOND BANANAS

The Paradox of the Mills Blue Rhythm Band

Let's say you're Irving Mills. As one of the leading booking agents in New York, with much money tied up in the fortunes of both Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, you're going to be concerned with how they fare at the box office.

As the *New York Age*, one of the outstanding black newspapers of the day, put it, Mills „personally supervises every orchestration and arrangement the [Ellington] band plays. He arranges the bookings and directs the exploitation in general. He selects the records made for the various phonograph companies, and is master of the destinies of Ellington.“

That also means protecting his protégée from incursions into his popularity by other bands. No problem with a rather more pliant Cab Calloway, whom Mills also managed and controlled, and who achieved his first, and arguably most lasting, fame playing at the Cotton Club. Both bands did well enough at the popular room

to fetch invitations to travel. In summer, 1929, for example, Ellington's band went west to Hollywood, where they appeared in Amos and Andy's feature film, *Check and Double Check*. Calloway moved in as substitute ensemble, and made out just fine. So well, in fact, that he, too, began to get offers for „outside“ work.

But what of those times when both bands were out of town? A Harlem band led first by reedman Bingie Madison, and later by drummer Willie Lynch, had a strong reputation, had been known under different names, and sometimes — when backing Louis Armstrong on records — no name at all. They were respected uptown as a team; and in saxophonists Joe Garland, Gene Mikell, and Crawford Wethington, trumpeter Ed Anderson, and trombonist Henry Hicks they had reliable soloists.

No surprise that they provided a ready answer to Mills' dilemma. They turned up on records for the first time in 1931 as

Mills Music Masters, and then, some weeks later, as the Mills Blue Rhythm Band. At some point in 1930 Mills finally took over management and promotional duties and cast them as a house unit for the Cotton Club, booking them as standing replacements for Ellington and Calloway when those groups were on tour.

Ironically, that proved both their triumph and their undoing. Just as Joe Glaser later controlled the professional fortunes of Lips Page — seeing to it that the popular Texas-born trumpeter-vocalist posed no threat to Glaser's trumpet-playing star Louis Armstrong — Mills saw to it that the Blue Rhythm Band never quite became the sort of attraction at 142nd and Lenox Avenue that might threaten Ellington or Calloway.

That took some doing. A band had to be good, and sometimes more than that, to succeed at the Cotton Club. It had to be quick at cutting the shows, especially with such top composers as Jimmy McHugh, Dorothy Fields and Harold Arlen contributing material. It had to work easily in the „jungle“ style which was by now a Cotton Club signature, but also had to deal easily with jump numbers in the style of the popular Casa Loma orchestra, then turn around and dispense sentimental novelties

in the Calloway manner. In short, it had to be a little of everything, borrowing styles from many bands.

As the records indicate, the Mills band coped admirably — but they achieved their status as *Doppelgaengers* for other bands at the expense of their own identity. Examination of the records tells the story: *Harlem Heat* and *Spitfire* are equal to anything Gene Gifford cooked up for the Casa Loma. Vocalist Chuck Richards handles features such as *Broken Dreams of You* with smooth-toned elegance. Trumpeter Wardell Jones growls in convincing fashion on such numbers as the faux-Ellington *African Lullaby*. Saxophonists Garland, Crawford Wethington and Gene Mikell have superb moments throughout.

But there is no one performance which sounds convincingly individual. They were working at a prestige job: they couldn't complain about that. But they must have realized as a unit that the sheer nature of the work would eternally confine them to second banana status.

„No nightspot offered more thrills than the Cotton Club,“ Geoffrey Ward has written. „Nostalgia for the antebellum South set the bizarre theme — the big stage was designed to resemble the verandah of a plantation house, complete



with tall white columns and a painted background of slave cabins and live oak trees draped with moss — and the main attraction was a lavish floor show in the Florenz Ziegfeld tradition that featured songs, dances, and lots of light-skinned, lightly clad chorus girls billed as tall, tan, and terrific...it was the job every ambitious black bandleader in town wanted, including Duke Ellington."

A *Variety* reviewer expanded this theme. "The almost Caucasian-hued high yaller gals look swell and uncork the meanest kind of cooching ever exhibited to a conglomerate mixed audience...possessed of the native jazz heritage their hotsy-totsy performance if working sans wraps could never be parred by a white gal. The brownskins shivaree is worth the \$2 couvert alone."

So at once Mills was building Calloway into a star and the Blue Rhythm Band into a junior varsity able to fill in distinctively where needed, whether at the Cotton Club or at many road destinations rejected by Ellington or Calloway. But the band continued to improve. Pianist Edgar Hayes joined in late 1930, providing technically impressive solos in the florid style of Eddy Duchin. In autumn of 1931 O'Neill Spencer replaced Lynch on drums, lending

a smooth bottom to the rhythm section. 1934 saw genial Lucius Venable „Lucky“ Millinder added as a pleasing, mild-mannered front man. By the end of 1933 the Blue Rhythm Band could „cover“ other bands' hits with polish and drive — and no little sparkle.

And to be sure, their individual band performances have many bright moments. *The Stuff Is Here (and It's Mellow)* is one among many tunes devoted to the real or imagined glories of „mouta“ (marijuana), and it serves up good solos by trombonist George Washington, trumpeters Ed Anderson (open) and Wardell Jones (muted), and tenor saxophonist Joe Garland. Garland is also responsible for *There's Rhythm in Harlem*, first appearance of what will eventually become *In the Mood*. All the ingredients are here — it only awaits rigorous editing and condensation to emerge as the Glenn Miller hit on 1939. But the long trail starts here.

The Growl, done at the same time, introduces perhaps the most individual of the band's soloists, if its least known: Crawford Wethington on the seldom-heard baritone sax. It comes as a bit of a shock to realize that apart from Harry Carney, no one in those years used the baritone as a

convincing solo vehicle. While such white soloists as Jimmy Dorsey and Don Murray and Clarence Hutchenrider with the Casa Loma band used it occasionally, it was as a double, intriguing as a novelty but lacking depth.

Wethington's baritone statements, by contrast, were powerful and personal. His contributions to *Let's Have a Jubilee*, *Keep the Rhythm Going*, and Allen's feature *Ride, Red, Ride* are especially strong and convincing. On clarinet Gene Mikell is also persuasive, adopting a „guttty“ sound; his clarinet solos on such numbers as *The Growl* make entertaining listening before the arrival of Buster Bailey.

Late 1933 brought changes. Fletcher Henderson, briefly managed by Irving Mills, was in one of his periodic slumps. His band was scheduled to open at the Cotton Club on June 16, with nightly airtime over station WMCA. Without doubt, the engagement would have restored a measure of morale to Henderson's men. As *The Amsterdam News* remarked,

Things are going badly for Fletcher Henderson right now. After everything was set at the Cotton Club, including signed contracts, the owners of the Club suddenly

changed their mind and asked for the Blue Rhythm Band, thus displaying their usual bad taste in music. Irving Mills did the best he could, but the Cotton Club gents are not folk to argue with.

Henderson hit the road. Despite every attempt by John Hammond to secure a European tour, he was left with little work of substance in the rest of 1934. Trumpeter Henry „Red“ Allen, for one, little relished the thought of spending more time on the road; his son was almost three, and Allen very much wanted to stay close to home. He was also short of patience with Henderson's careless way of doing business. Mills, meanwhile, was concentrating on booking the Blue Rhythm Band in the East, sending them out for short trips while keeping them working in New York City.

He saw an opportunity to build the band up a bit by importing some solo star power, and approached Allen, Bailey, Higginbotham and Lawrence Lucie with an offer to move. „We were wiith Fletcher Henderson in Cleveland at the time, and the future was pretty uncertain,“ Lucie told Stanley Dance. „We told Henderson how we enjoyed the band, but here was a chance to make some money. Fletcher thought it was all right for us to go, so we



left and went to the Cotton Club as members of the Mills Blue Rhythm Band."

Mills offered leadership of the band to Allen, who quickly turned him down, far more content to remain a sideman. As it was, their entry into the band was anything but pleasant. „I guess the reaction was natural [in that] we joined what had previously been a „family band," full of guys who had worked together for a long time," he told biographer John Chilton.

Allen solos gloriously on *Swingin' in Eb*,

and *Let's Have a Jubilee*, both recorded on October 4, 1934, and Higgy and Bailey are first heard on *Back Beats*, *Spitfire* and *Brown Sugar Mine*, done the following January 25. The band gradually improves, playing more complex arrangements in a more assertive fashion. It might be said that the pre-Allen band plays like a very good amateur ensemble, but with the arrival of the Henderson men metamorphoses into a very good professional band.

Allen's presence is obvious in *Waiting in the Garden*, *Sweet Dinah Lou*, *Cotton*, and

Truckin' (on which he sings). His solos are strong, impassioned, easily recognized. He's even better on *Eb Stride*, bringing to mind Whitney Balliett's description of „Sustained legato phrases that undulate like a calming sea... linked by jumpy connective notes — full of seven-league intervals and slightly flattened notes — that may or may not land on their feet." *Dinah Lou* showcases all three new horn players — Allen for 16 bars, then Higgy and Buster for eight each. They are obviously confident and in very much in charge, and it can't be accidental that Garland, Wethington, Mikell and even Hayes get a lot less solo space once the celebrity newcomers have settled in.

This period finds the Blue Rhythm Band at a new standard, with precision of attack and challenging arrangements spotlighting excellent solos. If *Ride, Red, Ride* with its various tempos and spectacular climax is a showcase for Allen, his solos on other records are yet more rewarding. He's heard, effectively, on almost every performance, with *Broken Dreams of You*, *Yes, Yes*, and *Shoe Shine Boy* standouts. *Blue Mood*, clearly modelled on Ellington, has Bailey providing a reasonable facsimile of the kind of mood that would have fallen to Barney Bigard. Other Ellington

„covers" include performances such as *In a Sentimental Mood* and *Merry-go-Round*. Even if the band provided its own original flavors — *St. Louis Wiggle Rhythm*, featuring Wethington's baritone in an original manner is a good example — it never seemed to take off, never left an individual flavor with its listeners.

Taken as a whole, it's obvious that the Blue Rhythm Band is a far better ensemble than its reputation would indicate. Solos are first-rate, and it displays admirable precision of ensemble work. It's only regrettable that it never got the booking and publicity that would have lifted it higher in public regard. Or, put differently, it's too bad that the band's circumstances resulted in its working in Ellington's shadow, which proved long and persistent. It's fortunate that they recorded frequently, and that their records are now available on CDs. Perhaps now, with the reality of their second-banana status no longer relevant, they will at last receive some of the credit their music deserves.

— Richard M. Sudhalter

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- Featuring Henry 'Red' Allen, J.C. Higginbotham, Albert Nicholas, Charlie Holmes, George 'Pops' Foster (2 cd set)
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- Featuring Bunny Berigan, Jack Purvis
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- Featuring Tommy Dorsey, Joe Venuti, Dick McDonough, Benny Goodman
- RTR 79039 The Sunshine Boys (Joe and Dan Mooney), 1929 - 1931: The Complete Set
- Featuring Tommy Dorsey, Joe Venuti, Dick McDonough, Benny Goodman
- RTR 79040 Bix Beiderbecke with Jean Goldkorn's Orchestra (1924-1927). Featuring Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang, Steve Brown, Danny Polo, Frankie Trumbauer etc.
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- RTR 79044 The Original Memphis Five 1922-1926. Pathe Instrumentals: The Complete Set.

Produced and Compiled by
CHRIS ELLIS

Audio Restoration
JOHN R.T. DAVIES

Original Material
JOHN R.T. DAVIES

Liner Notes
RICHARD M. SUDHALTER

Production Consultant
JOHN R.T. DAVIES

Sleeve Design
MARCEL VAN DEN BROEK

Production Coordination
ROBJ SCHIFF

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**RETRIEVAL
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NOORDERWEG 40**

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THE NETHERLANDS**

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Retrieval Recordings took over the Fountain catalogue, founded in 1971 by Ron Jewson and Norman Stevens, later joined by John R.T. Davies who had been responsible for the audio restoration from the beginning. His work fully respects the qualities of the original recordings, though fragments may have been changed for technical reasons only. Nothing has been added or omitted.

Made in the Netherlands



CHALLENGE
RECORDS

MILLS BLUE RHYTHM BAND 1933-1936

FEATURING: RED ALLEN, CRAWFORD WETHINGTON, ADELAIDE HALL, J.C. HIGGINSBOTHAM

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10. Solitude	3.03	10. Midnight Ramble	2.58
11. Dancing Dogs	2.49	11. Red Rhythm	3.02
12. Love's Serenade	2.57	12. Everything Is Still Okay	3.13
13. Keep The Rhythm Going	2.51	13. Jes' Natch'ally Lazy	3.04
14. Like A Bolt From The Blue	3.01	14. St. Louis Wiggle Rhythm	2.54
15. Blue Interlude	2.54	15. Merry - Go -Round	2.52
16. A Rainbow Filled With Music	2.43	16. It Will Have To Do Until The Real Thing Comes Along	3.17
17. Devil In The Moon	2.56	17. In A Sentimental Mood	2.52
18. Back Beats	2.47	18. Carry Me Back To Green Pastures	3.09
19. Spitfire	3.01	19. Balloonacy	3.00
20. Brown Sugar Mine	3.11	20. Barrelhouse	3.05
21. Ride Red Ride	3.01	21. The Moon Is Grinning At Me	3.02
22. Harlem Heat	3.03	22. Showboat Shuffle	3.16
23. Once To Every Heart	2.56	23. Big John's Special	2.58
24. Congo Caravan	2.41	24. Mr. Ghost Goes To Town	3.24
25. There's Rhythm In Harlem	3.11	25. Callin' Your Bluff	3.00
26. Tallahassee	2.36	26. Algiers Stomp	3.04
Total Time: 76:12		Total Time: 78:33	



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